

This week in history: April 8-14

8 April 2013

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years ago: Thousands of Pakistani casualties on eve of Afghanistan accord

A massive explosion at a supply depot in the capital region of Pakistan killed an undetermined number of people on April 10, 1988. Estimates ranged as high as 5,000 dead and many thousands injured. Camp Ojhri was a CIA-supplied munitions dump storing tactical assault weapons for anti-Soviet mujahedin fighters in Afghanistan.

The people of the area around the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad were gripped with panic as shells and rockets rained down in an eight-mile radius from the Ojhri supply depot. US news sources at the time played down the casualties, but streets and fields were littered with thousands of pieces of ordnance and hospitals were filled with mothers desperately searching for their children.

The US claimed to have learned from Pakistani military officials that the explosion was the result of a “coordinated sabotage attack” by supporters of the pro-Soviet Afghan regime. The claim was that three incendiary devices with timed fuses were placed by trucks bearing Afghan license plates. Years later, this scenario was disputed by insider accounts that maintained it was Pakistani military dictator Zia al-Huq himself who engineered the blast to cover for arms profiteering. Several investigations into the incident were inconclusive.

At any rate, the timing of the blast was significant. The signing of the Geneva Accords in Switzerland was scheduled for later that same week, on April 14. The pact, intended to formalize Afghanistan’s transition to a nonaligned country, was to be signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan with the US and the Soviet Union signing as guarantors of the country’s neutrality. The accords would signal the withdrawal of Soviet troops later in May.

The US had close relations with the military dictatorship in Pakistan and used the country as a supply base for its proxy war against the Soviet-aligned Najibullah regime in Kabul. The signing of the Geneva Accords was a cynical formality, as the US had no intention of discontinuing its backing of Islamist forces.

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50 years ago: Diefenbaker loses Canada election amidst US intervention

On April 8, 1963, the Progressive Conservative Party of Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was defeated by the Liberal Party led by Lester Pearson, setting the stage for the formation of a Liberal government on April 17. The election brought to an end Diefenbaker’s five years as prime minister, which began in 1957 when the Conservatives unexpectedly won a plurality of seats, ending 22 years of Liberal rule.

Canada’s relationship with the US dominated the election. Controversy had emerged over a 1961 US State Department “working paper” that had inadvertently fallen into Diefenbaker’s hands, in which US President John Kennedy penciled in the margins, “what do we do with the S.O.B now?” Behind personal tensions between Kennedy and Diefenbaker was a sharp dispute over the stationing of nuclear weapons in Canada.

In a remarkable instance of intervention in Canadian politics, the retiring commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Lauris Norstad, declared in Ottawa on January 3, 1963, that Diefenbaker had failed in his obligation to NATO by refusing to allow the stationing of Bomarc surface nuclear missiles in Canada. Pearson and the opposition Liberals joined in the attack.

When Diefenbaker gave a long speech to parliament asserting that nuclear weapons could be placed on planes in an emergency, the US State Department issued a statement effectively backing Pearson. This led to the resignation on February 4 of Defense Secretary Douglass Harkness in protest against Diefenbaker, followed the next day by the opposition parties pushing through two votes of no confidence. Parliament was dissolved, setting the stage for the April 8 election. Diefenbaker further angered the Kennedy administration by using the dispute with Washington as a campaign tool.

Diefenbaker and the Conservatives lost 21 seats but maintained their domination of most of western Canada, whose agriculture was booming from extensive trade with the Soviet bloc. The Liberals gained 29 seats, but fell short of the number needed to form a majority government, and so allied with the New Democratic Party, which had won 17 seats in its second national election.

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75 years ago: Popular Front government falls in France

Leon Blum's second Popular Front ministry collapsed on April 10, 1938. After less than a month back in office, the man who two years earlier was made the first Socialist and Jewish French Prime Minister saw his moribund administration rejected heavily in a vote by the French Senate. The coup de grace finally came when by a 4-1 majority Senate members voted not to discuss Blum's Keynesian financial proposals of government-led investment, exchange controls and a wealth tax.

After consultation with right-wing French President Albert Lebrun, Blum's administration was replaced by another Popular Front cabinet, this time one headed by Blum's former defense minister, the Radical Party leader Edouard Daladier. Signaling a definitive turn away from the class compromise politics of Blum, Daladier did not offer ministerial portfolios to either the Socialist Party or the Stalinist French Communist Party, the PCF.

The counter-revolutionary role and policies of the PCF were expressed in their motto "*la main tendue*"—"the outstretched hand." Since 1934, when ordered to do so by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, the PCF dropped all mention of socialist revolution and workers' power and instead adopted a bourgeois-nationalist political language.

The militant mood of the French working class stood in sharp contrast. A strike and occupation movement of 100,000 Parisian steel and engineering workers continued, bringing the metal and aircraft industries to a standstill. The red flag flew proudly from a plethora of occupied factories, foundries and workshops. The Popular Front administration denounced the strike for retarding weapons production, and the Blum cabinet, just prior to its fall, claimed that the dispute had already cost the French military 100 planes for a likely future war effort.

On April 12 the Daladier cabinet was rocked by the extension of the strike to a further 40,000 workers, when employees at the giant Renault plant just outside Paris at Billancourt stopped vehicle production and occupied the factory premises.

The Stalinist leadership of the CGT, the largest French trade union federation, negotiated a settlement after ordering striking workers to end their workplace occupations and return to work on terms that included increasing their workweek back to 45 hours. French workers only two years previously had won the historic concession of a 40-hour week.

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alter electoral laws, and under increasing pressure from the masses, was the strike called.

Belgium had a highly concentrated industrial working class with a history of mass strikes dating back to 1893. At least half of the country's industrial working class took part in the 1913 strike, paralyzing the major manufacturers. In little over a week, however, the Socialist Party instructed workers to end strike action, following a promise by the prime minister to establish a commission to "investigate" the question of plural voting. The strike formally ended on April 22. Plural voting remained in place throughout World War I.

The conciliatory policies of the Belgian socialists were commented on by a number of leading Marxist figures internationally, in the context of the intensifying struggle between revolutionary and opportunist tendencies in the socialist movement. Rosa Luxemburg, the most consistent representative of the revolutionary opposition to opportunist and conservative trade unionist tendencies that were increasingly dominating the German socialist movement, referred to the Belgian strike in a speech on the "political mass strike."

Luxemburg commented that as a result of the policies of the opportunist social democrats who oriented to liberalism, "the strike was discontinued upon the first illusory concession made, a concession which represented a gain of virtually nothing ... We see then, that the mass strike, employed in conjunction with the policy of a grand coalition, resulted in nothing but setbacks." She called on German social democracy to reject the opportunist politics that had led to the betrayal of the Belgian strike.

Lenin wrote that the result of the strike demonstrated the necessity for a break with bourgeois liberals, a fight for socialist consciousness, and a politically independent party of the working class.

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100 years ago: Belgium paralyzed by general strike

Beginning on April 14, 1913, Belgium was convulsed by a mass strike that mobilized up to 400,000 workers. The strike was called by the Belgian Socialist Party, in opposition to "plural voting," which granted individual landowners, the educated, and the wealthy a greater number of votes than ordinary people.

The strike followed the electoral victory of conservative Catholic elements the year before. The socialist opposition had first decided in June 1912 to hold a general strike at some point in the future. Only when it became clear that the King would not intercede to